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¶1. (SBU) Ref A reported questions on the status of the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV) and on allegations of serious harassment of UBCV members in provinces in the HCMC Consular district. This message provides our analysis of the status of the UBCV and the causes for government repression, which run contrary to the overall improvement in conditions in religious freedom in Vietnam. In our view, the repression of the UBCV is triggered by its insistence on complete organizational freedom and its political opposition to single-party, Communist rule in Vietnam. The rights of the UBCV leaders to assemble, organize and peacefully express their views should be guaranteed, but are not a question of religious freedom.

What is the UBCV?

¶2. (SBU) The UBCV was formed in 1964 to voice the political and social concerns of the Buddhist community in the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam). Up to 20 different Buddhist sects merged to form the UBCV. Many within the UBCV were anti-war, a position that benefited the North, although the direct influence of the Viet Cong and the "National Liberation Front" on the UBCV is unclear. The UBCV was an outgrowth of the massive protests that triggered the coup against President Ngo Dinh Diem's government. These protests included the dramatic self-immolation of Thich Quang Duc in HCMC in 1963.

¶3. (SBU) Following the fall of the Republic of Vietnam in 1975, the Communist Party moved to consolidate all mass and civil society organizations under its control. The UBCV was a natural target because of its history of pre-1975 political activism. In 1981, after UBCV Patriarch Thich Huyen Quang, General Secretary Thich Quang Do and other leaders refused to submit to

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Communist Party control, the UBCV was banned and the GVN-recognized Vietnam Buddhist Sangha (VBS) established. Some prominent monks and nuns affiliated with the UBCV joined the VBS.

Current Level of Strength of the UBCV

¶4. (SBU) Even in its heyday, the UBCV did not command the adherence of all Buddhist schools in southern Vietnam. UBCV General Secretary Thich Quang Do told us that he estimated that 75 percent of the Republic of Vietnam's Buddhists were affiliated with the UBCV. Buddhists in what was North Vietnam

had no affiliation with the UBCV.

15. (SBU) GVN controls make it impossible to determine the current level of popularity of the UBCV in southern Vietnam. Our discussions with a number of VBS monks, some of whom are contemporaries of Thich Quang Do, indicate that some VBS leaders chafe under GVN control and wish for more organizational independence. They view their participation in the VBS as the best available option to heal the nation following the war and to focus on administering to the religious and social needs of the Vietnamese (Ref B). VBS officials say there is no day-to-day interference in their ability to perform religious duties. It is unclear how many VBS leaders would return to the UBCV if the ban were lifted.

16. (SBU) The UBCV has been able to maintain a relatively robust organization, despite GVN repression. Its monks are energetic and charismatic. They command respect from the local community. For example, Thich Thien Hanh, the senior-most UBCV monk in Thua Thien Hue province in central Vietnam, told us that he has formed what is in effect a breakaway group of 200 VBS monks operating in 40 pagodas and three training schools in Hue and Quang Tri provinces.

Doctrine, Organizational Independence, and Politics

17. (SBU) In separate meetings over the last two years, Thich Quang Do, Thich Huyen Quang and Thich Thien Hanh have told us that there are no doctrinal religious differences between the VBS and UBCV. The basic fault line is UBCV opposition to Communist Party control over the internal organizational affairs of the Buddhist Church. In April 2003, Thich Huyen Quang rejected an apparent overture from then-Prime Minister Phan Van Khai to take over the leadership of the VBS. The UBCV's response was to convene an organizational conclave in October 2003. UBCV leaders are aware of new GVN suggestions that it register under a different name and with new leadership, or that the UBCV and the VBS might merge. Thich Quang Do told us in July that the UBCV was willing to support a merger if the new entity were independent, but the GVN would never permit this

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(Ref C).

18. (SBU) It is unclear when the UBCV's struggle for organizational independence morphed into opposition to a single-party State. The Internet carries a speech by UBCV Patriarch Thich Huyen Quang from 1993 in which he called for free elections and multi-party reforms. The UBCV's struggle for organizational independence and its political opposition to single party rule have become intrinsically linked. For example, in one meeting with us, Thich Quang Do said that Communist Party leaders recognize that a unified, independent Buddhist organization would grow "beyond their control" and would be dangerous to the regime. Thich Quang Do repeatedly has made it clear to us that he is a political rather than a religious opponent of the Party. He will not compromise with Hanoi, so long as the Communist Party maintains a monopoly on power.

19. (SBU) In this regard, both Thich Quang Do and the UBCV Patriarch also refer to the dramatic role the UBCV and Buddhist monks played in toppling the Diem regime in 1963. They have indicated that they could use organizational independence to oppose the Communists were they given the chance. UBCV Patriarch Thich Huyen Quang has a picture of Thich Quang Duc's self-immolation in the entryway to his office as a symbol of the strength and determination of Buddhist resistance (Ref D).

110. (SBU) There appears to be some difference of opinion within the UBCV over Thich Quang Do's strong anti-communist stance. Thich Thien Hanh, the UBCV leader in Hue, told us last year that he would be willing to merge with the VBS and operate under current Vietnamese law, were the new organization independent from the GVN. In contrast to Thich Quang Do, Thich Thien Hanh

met with international Buddhist leader Thich Nhat Hanh during the latter's groundbreaking return to Vietnam in 2005 (Ref E). (Thich Quang Do refused to meet Thich Nhat Hanh as Hanh would not meet with him in his capacity as the General Secretary of the UBCV. Hanh, who had painstaking negotiations with the GVN over his visit, would not or could not meet Thich Quang Do under those conditions.)

Repression Waxes and Wanes

¶11. (SBU) Thich Quang Do and other senior UBCV leaders were placed under "pagoda arrest" after their October 2003 organizational meeting. However, the level of repression and restrictions on movement appears to be carefully calibrated. The GVN will not allow Thich Quang Do to meet with the UBCV Patriarch, who is based in Binh Dinh Province in Central Vietnam, because of fears that this might strengthen the movement. However Thich Quang Do is able to communicate with colleagues and associates inside and outside Vietnam. The UBCV's Paris-based mouthpiece, the International Buddhist Information Bureau (and its website queme.com), is able to issue press releases on our visits with Thich Quang Do within hours. Moreover, in our meetings, Thich Quang Do has been remarkably well informed about Communist Party and dissident community developments inside and outside Vietnam. He also is able to receive visitors including other UBCV monks and political dissidents (Ref F).

¶12. (SBU) In our judgment, GVN-directed repression against the UBCV is a response to ongoing efforts by Thich Quang Do to reestablish a formal organizational structure through the creation of provincial "representative boards." To date, the UBCV has established 18 such boards in HCMC and in provinces in central and southern Vietnam. Members of these representative boards have been the focus of official harassment. For example, our contacts in the UBCV have been able to confirm the expulsion of UBCV nun Thich Nu Thong Man from her pagoda in central coastal Khanh Hoa province. (Incidents involving the UBCV nun first reported Ref G).

¶13. (SBU) We spoke on September 20 with Thich Vinh Phuoc, Secretary of the UBCV provincial board in Ba Ria Vung Tau

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Province, who told us that he and other board members have come under increasing pressure from local authorities and the VBS. For example, in July police verbally threatened the provincial board after monks held a ceremony to consecrate 120 new monks into Buddhist service. Thich Vinh Phuoc also claimed that there had been two separate firebombing attempts against him and another board member -- Thich Thanh Tinh -- in August, and pointed to the police as the culprits.

¶14. (SBU) We subsequently spoke with Thich Vien Dinh, a senior

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member of the national executive of the UBCV, about the Ba Ria Vung Tau firebombing allegations. While stating that the overall intensity of police harassment had increased over the past few months, he said it was "uncharacteristic" for the GVN to make any physical assault against a monk, let alone attempt to kill him. He said he had no further information on the incidents and did not offer any additional explanation. We also spoke with a representative of the Ba Ria Vung Tau provincial Committee for Religious Affairs (CRA). The CRA official told us that the creation of a UBCV representative board in the province was "illegal" and that the province was planning to replace the UBCV officials with "civil managers" to run the pagoda in question. The CRA firmly rejected allegations that officials attempted to firebomb the UBCV pagoda or to attack the two monks. The official said that perhaps the two monks staged the attacks to attract attention to the UBCV and to embarrass the government.

¶15. (SBU) UBCV contacts also report that police are encouraging

local believers not to associate with pagodas linked to UBCV provincial board members. In some localities officials also are stepping up propaganda against the UBCV, accusing it of "reactionary" (political) activities. Other representative board members routinely are summoned for "working sessions" with the police.

Comment

¶16. (SBU) The recent GVN decision to register a small Buddhist sect -- Tu An Hieu Nghia (the Four Gratuities) -- and the pending registration of a second -- Tinh Do Cu Si Phat Hoi (Buddhist Mercy) -- indicate that there are other independent streams of Buddhist practice in Vietnam. They also suggest that the GVN now is prepared to recognize and tolerate a greater level of diversity within the Buddhist community. This is consistent with a more nuanced GVN approach to religion writ large in which the GVN has been willing to legalize Protestant and other religious groups so long as these organizations are strictly apolitical (Ref H).

¶17. (SBU) The Communist Party's monopoly on the political process in Vietnam is enshrined in law and in practice. Despite international human rights standards, Vietnam does not permit the UBCV -- or any other opposition group -- to organize, assemble peacefully or express political views in opposition to the GVN. The UBCV leadership's position against single Party rule in Vietnam is influenced by its unshakeable belief about the role of Buddhism in Vietnamese society and its members' strong views on social justice. That said, even Thich Quang Do acknowledges that the UBCV's objections to the current situation in Vietnam are political in nature, not religious.

¶18. (SBU) In Thich Quang Do's mind, there is no single bigger threat to single-Party rule than a free Thich Quang Do and an independent UBCV. Energetic, magnetic, determined, principled, Thich Quang Do without a doubt could be one of Vietnam's best opposition politicians. And the UBCV is well within its rights to reject GVN overtures that might compromise its independence. For its part, the Communist Party, which exploited the agitation of the UBCV and other religious groups to further its goals pre-1975, also knows its history and its adversaries well. So long as both sides maintain their current positions, we see no possible room for compromise, even as the GVN moves to legalize other religious groups in Vietnam. End Comment.

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